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ABSTRACT

This paper is divided into two main sections. In the first, the author assumes that it is theory per se that people in educational administration are urged to develop and considers the cognitive, intellectual problems for which theory development might provide a solution. In the second section, the author interprets the concern for theory development more broadly and assumes that persons in educational administration are being urged to devote themselves to the advancement of knowledge generally, including the eventual development of theory. Here the focus of attention is on the noncognitive, that is, social, organizational, and administrative problems for which the advancement of knowledge might provide a solution. The author concludes that theory building is not an activity that is useful apart from the cognitive problems for which theories are solutions, namely, explaining observed regularities, organizing knowledge, and guiding research. Many of these problems do not confront the field at the present time. The author sees advancement of knowledge generally as a partial solution to the problem of rationalizing administrative practice. She asserts, however, that a more complete solution requires the clarification of the value base of administrative practice. (Author/IRT)

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THEORY DEVELOPMENT IN EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION: A SOLUTION TO WHAT PROBLEM?

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INTRODUCTION

A fairly common experience that I have in the course of my professional activities is the perception that advocates of a given course of action have failed to analyze with sufficient care the situation which led them to advocate that course of action. I find myself in that position today with reference to the message that seems implicit in this symposium. The message, as I read it, is this: "Theory building is a course of action to which we in educational administration should devote increased effort". Note, for example, that the stated purpose of this symposium is to examine, and to suggest alternatives to, recent approaches to theory building, not to consider whether or not theory building as a useful, timely, or even feasible undertaking.

I find it somewhat strange that anyone would advocate such a course of action, at least under what I take to be the prevailing conditions. And, as is my wont under such circumstances, I am inclined to resort to an analytic technique that serves me well on such occasions. The technique to which I refer is a simple one. It involves asking a question, namely, "For what problem, or problems, is the advocated course of action seen as a solution"? That is the question I want to raise here today concerning the building of theory in educational administration; for what problem, or problems, is it seen as a solution?

There may be those who, even in our field, regard theory development as an activity requiring no legitimation by more distant ends, but I think such persons would be in the minority. Even the most vigorous proponents of theory tend to support their positions with assertions concerning long-range benefit to the field. In view of this "fact" it does not seem unreasonable to suppose that the development of theory is regarded generally as a solution to some problem, or problems. The question is, "What problem?" An answer to that question will permit us to ask some further questions, namely, "Is it reasonable to suppose that there is such a

problem?"* "Is the proposed course of action a sufficient condition of its solution?" Perhaps asking and answering such questions as these will provide a useful perspective or theory building in our field.

The remarks which follow are divided into two main sections. In the first, I assume that it is theory per se that we are urged to develop, and consider the cognitive, intellectual, problems for which theory development might provide a solution. The question then becomes, "Are we, in the field of educational administration, confronted by such problems?" In the second section, I interpret the concern for theory development more broadly, and assume that we are urged to devote ourselves to the advancement of knowledge generally, including, of course, the eventual development of theory. Here the focus of attention is on the non-cognitive, i.e., social, organizational, or administrative, problems, for which the advancement of knowledge might provide a solution. In this section, the follow-up question becomes, "Is the advancement of knowledge a necessary condition of the solution of the problem?" "Is it a sufficient one?" If not, "What elements are missing?"

THEORY AS A SOLUTION TO COGNITIVE PROBLEMS

The term "theory" has a variety of meanings from among which one may select according to his assessment of usefulness. The meaning that I attach to it will become clear as the discussion develops, and given that meaning, there is an obvious set of cognitive problems for which theory provides a solution. The first of these can be illustrated as follows. We have at hand some observed uniformities, or empirical generalizations.** Certain dietary conditions are associated with the occurrence of scurvy; the characteristics of the off-spring of hybrid plants are distributed in certain proportions; the changes of position of celestial bodies

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*I am aware of the "fact" that problems are not objective states of affairs on which all competent observers must agree. However, if we treat problems as having two components, one normative, the other empirical, then we can make inquiries regarding the validity of the empirical component.

**They may also be well-supported theoretical generalization.

follow regular patterns; the originality of the artistic efforts of individual students are highly variable, and so on. The problem here for which theory, as I conceive it, as a solution, is "How can we explain the occurrence of these uniformities?" or "What kind of underlying, unobservable, mechanisms can we postulate which will have the observed regularities as logical consequences?"

The second cognitive problem for which theory provides a solution is the organization of knowledge. It does this by integrating, or subsuming under a single higher-order theory unrelated sets of generalizations requiring separate lower-order theories. Thus, Newton's work integrated the fields of terrestrial and celestial motion, and Darwin's work integrated information concerning the origins and development of human and non-human life.

Finally, third, theory provides a solution to the problem of how to select the most promising from among the infinite variety of research questions that might be asked in a given area. It does that, of course; by permitting one to deduce hypotheses for empirical testing from the mechanisms postulated to account for the initial uniformities.

The gist of the position that I have just outlined is this. Theory is not something that one sets out to build as an end unto itself, or as an activity isolated from other activities.* Theory, in the present sense, is an instrument the primary functions of which are to explain uniformities, organize and integrate knowledge, and provide direction in the pursuit of knowledge. Theory building is an aspect of scientific inquiry which becomes useful only in conjunction with other aspects. To focus attention on theory building as a separate activity (while useful from an epistimological perspective) is to miss the point. The time to become concerned about theory development is when there are uniformities to be explained.

Given the preceding, the question becomes, "Are we confronted with these sorts of cognitive problems in the field of educational administration?" I am not

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*Unless one is a logician, or a mathematician.

sufficiently well informed about the state of knowledge in all the substantive areas of concern to our field to answer that question with confidence. However, I suspect that there are few areas in which there is a firm foundation of empirical uniformities about which to theorize. Were this not the case, we would probably be talking about the development of a theory of this, or a theory of that, not about the development of theory per se.

The opinions just expressed about the paucity of generalizations about which to theorize may be relatively accurate when applied to the products of formal research efforts. However, they are quite inaccurate when applied to what can be asserted on the basis of everyday observation. Numerous examples of generalizations of this kind might be cited, but a particularly important one for me is this. It is an obvious fact that most schools include among their members individuals designated by such terms as "principal", "assistant principal", "superintendent", "assistant superintendent", and so on. Individuals so designated engage in activities different from those of other members. How do we account for this uniformity? If we ask that question at all, which we apparently do not, we answer in common sense terms which typically identify a set of tasks that administrators are to perform, and we base our preparation programs on those answers. We simply do not have a systematic account for these facts, and I would argue that this is one of the most serious cognitive problems confronting the field.

THE ADVANCEMENT OF KNOELEDGE AS A SOLUTION TO NON-COGNITIVE PROBLEMS

As suggested earlier, it may be that I have misconstrued the intent of those who emphasize theory building. Perhaps they wish to be understood as advocating the advancement of knowledge generally, rather than the building of theory per se. Let us suppose that that is the case and again pose the question, "For what problem is the advancement of knowledge a solution?"

The primary problem in educational administration for which the advancement of knowledge is seen as a solution seems to me to be "the more complete rationalization

of administrative practice". Put another way, it is the more complete implementation of the value of instrumental rationality. It is an article of faith in our field that it is desirable, insofar as possible, for administrators to select from among alternative means to given ends on the basis of valid knowledge. In the interest of achieving a closer approximation to that ideal, those of us involved in the preparation of practitioners have turned naturally to the social-behavioral sciences and to the scientific study of organizational phenomena in the search for relevant knowledge.

Posing the problem as one of contributing to the rationalization of practice permits us to ask a further question, "Is the advancement of knowledge a solution to the problem?" There is little doubt that it is a necessary condition, but is it a sufficient one? The answer, I am quite certain, has to be, "No, there are other conditions."

The sense in which the advancement of knowledge is not a sufficient condition for the rationalization of practice is evident in the definition of rationality. As the term is used here, rationality means selecting from among alternative means to ends on the bases of valid knowledge. Clearly, as a matter of definition, rationality requires both knowledge and some measure of clarity and consensus with respect to the ends, or goals, of action in the relevant context. If rationalization is to proceed on any basis other than in relation to the idiosyncratic ends of individual practitioners, then a reasonable degree of goal clarity and consensus is required. As we shall see, one aspect of the identification of the goals of practice is itself a matter of acquiring knowledge. However, a second, and equally important aspect, concerns the clarification of values.

Perhaps these points can be illustrated by considering the field of medicine. It seems quite clear that it would have been impossible to rationalize medical practice to its present degree had there been minimal clarity and consensus concerning the goals toward which practitioners were to direct their efforts. Lying

behind that clarity and consensus, of course, was, and is, a high degree of clarity and consensus with respect to health as a conception of the desirable state of the object of clinical interest.

Leaving aside the problem of consensus, the achievement of clarity with respect to goals seems to me to require answers to two fundamental questions, (1) What is the object of clinical interest? and (2) What is the desirable state of the object of clinical interest? Perhaps I may expand those points by referring again to the field of medicine. If we confine our discussion to somatic medicine, then the object of clinical interest for the medical practitioner is the human individual in its organic-physiological aspects. The desirable state of that object, of course, is the state of health. The term health is not without ambiguity, but a minimal, and probably widely acceptable, definition is "possession of the performance capacities considered normal at a particular stage of the life-course."

Now clearly, the generalized goal of medical practice is the prevention and cure of disease and illness, and the treatment of injury. But what is a disease? And, what is an illness? A disease, illness, or injury is a state of the organism which constitutes, or results in, an impairment of its performance capacities. Rheumatic fever is a state which impairs the functioning of the heart, which, in turn, impairs the performance capacities of the individual. Thus, the designation of a particular state of the organism as a disease is neither arbitrary, nor given in the intrinsic qualities of the state itself. It is relative; relative to the conception of the desirable, the possession and maintenance of performance capacities and the prolongation of life.

The point to be emphasized here is that the goals of medical practice are defined in relation to the conception of the desirable state of the organism. Since that conception is widely shared, and since there is a great deal of commonality in the types of impairments to which organisms are susceptible, it is possible to identify a range of common goals for the profession. Thus, not only

does the cure of each specific case of tuberculosis become a specific goal for any practitioner confronted by an instance of it, but also the prevention of the occurrence of that type of impairment becomes a general goal for the profession.

Given the identification of states of impairment--even at the preliminary level of the identification of symptoms, as when tuberculosis was called "consumption" and its causes were unknown--the elimination or management of the impairment constitutes a goal the attainment of which may be rationalized through the accumulation of knowledge. In short, the goals of practice become the foci around which to mobilize and organize knowledge. The more fundamental kind of knowledge, of course, is knowledge of the causes of the states of impairment. Often, but not always, such knowledge is essential to the development of therapeutic measures.

When we turn our attention to an examination of the field of educational administration, what do we find? It seems fair to say that there is neither a clearly defined, widely agreed upon range of goals toward which administrative action is to be directed, nor a clearly articulated widely shared conception of the desirable state of the object of clinical interest. It may even be doubted that we agree on what might be taken as the primary object of clinical interest for administrators.

Even if we assume that the organization, or suborganization, for which responsibility is assumed constitutes the object of clinical interest for the administrator, conceptions of its desirable state seem both vague and variable. If one were to attempt to formulate a conception of the desirable state of the educational organization, then I suspect that "effectiveness in bringing about desired changes in the knowledge, skill, and character levels of students" would be high on most lists of priorities. A more elaborate treatment of the value system of the school would certainly include a wide variety of other elements, for effectiveness is never the only value that is relevant to organizational operation. For example, my own recent experience leads me to suggest that not only is the "good" school one that is effective in the above sense, but also one that protects students from bodily harm by other students.

One could go on at length in specifying elements of the value system of the school, but the point I want to make is this. If we treat "effectiveness in bringing about desired changes..." as the parallel of "possession of normal performance capacities" (or health), then we are led to ask, "What constitutes the parallel of disease?" or "What states of the organization constitute, or result in, an impairment of its effectiveness?" To the extent that valid answers to that question are provided, we automatically identify goals for administrative practice. To the extent that we can identify such goals, we can then focus research efforts on the determination of the causes of these states, and on the development of corrective and preventative procedures.

What all this suggests to me is this. If our concern about the advancement of knowledge derives from an interest in the more complete rationalization of administrative practice, and if a paramount commitment of administration is to the maintenance of organizational effectiveness, then it is not only generalized theories and knowledge of organizations that we need, but also knowledge of the states of the organization which impair effectiveness, theories concerning their causes, and ultimately knowledge of corrective measures.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

To summarize and conclude; with respect to theory building, the central theme of this symposium, I do not regard that activity as a useful one apart from the cognitive problems for which theories are solutions, namely, explaining observed regularities, organizing knowledge, and guiding research. In addition, I cannot see that many of those problems confront our field at the present time. That being the case, I find little merit in proposals to commit greater resources to the development of theory *per se*. With respect to the alternative interpretation of the concern for theory development, i.e., the advancement of knowledge, I see that as a partial solution to the problem of rationalizing administrative practice.

A more complete solution requires the clarification of the value base of administrative practice. The identification of the values base(s) is a prerequisite to the identification of the goals of practice which, in turn, is a prerequisite to the rationalization of practice.